

U.S. Team Racewalkers Storm Chiapas

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San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas Mexico, site of a year-long indigenous peasant uprising, was recently host of the "1st Annual Very Professional Racewalk Training Camp." Three national team athletes, Andrzej Chylinski, Andrew Hermann and Dave McGovern traveled to Chiapas with their coach Bohdan Boulekowski immediately following the national 50km championships in Palo Alto, California.

The camp started off with a bang as McGovern mistakenly flew into Mexico City one day early. Up at the crack of noon the following day, a well-rested McGovern met his weary compatriots who flew the red-eye in from San Francisco via Dallas.

After the short flight to Tuxtla Gutierrez airport in Chiapas State, the gringos--each with sufficient luggage for the one-month camp--were herded into a sub-compact Nissan taxi cab for the two-hour drive to San Cristobal. After suffering through numerous leg and butt cramps, and three military check points along the winding mountain road, the troops finally arrived at the spacious hacienda that would serve as base camp for the month.

After a few days of easy training to recover from the 50km and acclimate to the 7,500 foot altitude, coach Boulekowski taught the guests gathered for his special 45th birthday fiesta how to rehydrate "the Polish way." Unfortunately the Mexican vodka proved far inferior to the Warsaw product, causing coach to "pull a McGovern." After sufficiently purging himself, Bohdan re-coined the famous phrase familiar to all tourists to Mexico: "Don't drink the wodka." Despite heeding the advice, Dave "Borracho Chamula Narizon Simpson" McGovern earned the first of his many nicknames by sunburning his nose so badly that he appeared very borracho (drunk) during the entire month.

Shortly thereafter, after feigning illness, Borracho skipped an important workout to sneak off to the local Indian village of Chamula with some friends to take part in one of the village's many religious festivals. After narrowly escaping marriage to several indigenous women due to a series of a bad translations, Borracho Chamula returned to the hacienda in time for a heated remote control battle to determine whether the athletes would watch Bohdan's favorite, the Mexican version of "Wheel of Fortune" or Dave's choice, the Spanish dubbed "The Simpsons." Borracho Chamula Narizon Simpson was victorious, and was awarded a pair of new nicknames to commemorate both the win, and the uncontrolled growth of his bulbous, sunburned Narizon

(big nose).

Although San Cristobal remained relatively quiet during the training camp, there were frequent reminders that a war being fought in the hills. Several times per week long workouts necessitated passage through a series of military checkpoints. The soldiers in their sandbagged bunkers soon adjusted to waving through the athletes who were clearly not hiding weapons in their shorts and singlets. On other workouts helicopters hovered overhead while military convoys loaded with M-16 toting troops rumbled past, and once while hiking into the mountains, a campesino strongly suggested that the athletes should turn back or else they would probably be killed if they proceeded any further.

Despite such warnings, these 2 1/2 to 5-hour hikes became a staple of the camp, as did daily hill-repeats up the 385 steps to the Iglesia de San Cristobal. After weeks of considering 2 minutes 45 seconds an excellent time up the stairs to the church, Chylinski put one in the record books by turning in a time of 2:18 on the final day of the camp--of course nobody was there to witness this monumental performance, but Andrzej swears he did it...

After the 7:00 a.m. stair climbing session, the athletes downed a light breakfast of cornflakes, leftovers, or in Andrzej's case, a couple of ham and cheese sandwiches. The main workout of the day followed at 9:00 or 10:00, depending upon the weather. Most days saw cloudless skies and temperatures in the mid 70s, but some mornings were cool enough to warrant a later start. Workouts ranged from easy 15 to 20 kilometer walks to hard 12 x 1 kilometer repeats or hilly 25 to 30 kilometer loops around the city. The comida, the main meal of the day, followed the morning workout at around 2:00, give or take, depending on whether Magdalena the muchacha was napping or cooking while the athletes were out training.

Unless shopping took precedence, a one to two hour siesta served to hasten the settling of Magdalena's heavily spiced entrees. On most days the afternoon nap was followed at around 5:00 by an easy 7 to 10 kilometer walk with drills or economy repeats. These easy sessions were simply recovery workouts to facilitate recovery from the more intense morning sessions. Evenings were used to unwind with a beverage or two in town, perhaps followed by a subtitled American movie. (Forest Gump proved to be utterly untranslatable, as most of the audience was left completely clueless by the extremely norteamericano-biased humor). Sundays were always rest days, the only workout being an easy stroll to the banos for a relaxing Turkish steam bath.

The athletes each found their own ways to break the monotony of the 140-160 kilometer weeks. Andrew, plagued by Saturday Night Fever, spent much of his spare time at the discos, Don Juan-drzej enjoyed playing tri-lingual scrabble with a number of local señoritas, while Dave read every English language book in the house before being distracted by a "cultural exchange" with a young Japanese photographer in town to track down rebel leader Subcommandante Marcos.

Most of these fits of "not so professional-ism" came after coach Boulekowski departed to Miami two weeks into the camp to watch the women's world cup trials race. Andrzej, undoubtedly distraught over Bohdan's departure, accidentally swallowed nearly the entire contents of a 1000 ml bottle of Mexico's finest tequila within the span of perhaps 45 minutes. Ironman Andrzej did quite well for the next hour or so, but was destined to repeat Bohdan's birthday feat as he left a healthy trail of undigested ham and cheese all the way from the discotheque bathroom through the gutters of San Cristobal to the front walk of the hacienda.

After sleeping in and sweating it out in the steam baths, an afternoon trip to the corrida was in order. After all, what better way to spend Super Bowl Sunday than taking in a good series of bullfights? Of course cheap-seat tickets for the sol or sunny side of the bullring were purchased, but the resourceful athletes soon settled themselves into the front row of the sombra, the more expensive shaded side of the arena.

Early on, one young matador was tossed airborne by a strong thrust of the horns, but in the end the bulls didn't

have a chance. The end result was a victory for the matadors, picadors, open-the-doors, shut-the-doors and whatever other kinds of doors were out there, that was even more lopsided than the 49ers trouncing of the Chargers. After meeting and congratulating the various bullfighters, the gringos walked home at dusk with a set of bloody banderilleros--freshly pulled from the recently deceased bulls--as souvenirs of the fights.

The end of the most difficult fourth and final week of the camp was celebrated with a small fiesta, and a special dinner at Emiliano's Mustache--home of the finest tacos de pastor in San Cristobal. The long bumpy ride back to Tuxla the following day allowed the athletes to reflect on the hard training of the previous four weeks. Thoughts soon turned toward the looming World Cup trials in Monterey California, After enduring four weeks of tough high-altitude training with one of the best coaches in the world, the athletes were leaving confident that their sacrifices would be rewarded by berths on the trip to face the world's best walkers in Beijing.

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